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CIA Watchdogs

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Washington.

The new arrangement worked out by Sen. Richard Russell (D-Ga.), chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and Sen. J. W. Fulbright (D-Ark.), chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, for broader surveillance of the Central Intelligence Agency, is better than nothing at all, but it is still a long way from what is needed.

This is the "Club" or "Establishment" way of resolving Senate disputes. It will no doubt head off another showdown fight in the Senate this session over Congressional supervision of the CIA. Yet in the long run it won't do.

It won't do because at best it remains a makeshift, informal, irregular and ineffective way of keeping tabs on this tiger in the tank of U. S. foreign and military policy: the tiger that can, and has, involved the U. S. in hostilities without any public sanction, or even public knowledge.

Every other agency of the government except the CIA is accountable to one or more standing committees of the Senate and House. But the CIA has managed for 20 years to squirm out of the effective reach of Congress.

Several days ago, for instance, Secretary of State Dean Rusk testified secretly for four hours before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Before the year is over, he and other top executives at State will be questioned many more times in executive session on the most intimate aspects of foreign policy.

Last year Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff spent more than 100 hours on the Hill answering questions in closed hearings on highly classified military matters.

Even the Atomic Energy Commission, which directs the most sensitive area of national security—nuclear power—must report daily and regularly to the Joint Atomic Energy Committee of the

Senate and House.

Why then this unique immunity for the CIA? The short answer is accident and Sen. Russell. It was instantly obvious that nuclear power would have to be brought under civilian control, but when the CIA was first organized in 1946 no one foresaw that it had the potential of becoming an "invisible government" of its own.

The upshot was that, in the absence of formal Congressional supervision, the agency gradually came under the loose surveillance of a so-called watchdog group, headed up by Sen. Russell and half a dozen other Senators and Representatives from the Armed Services and Appropriations Committees.

Since the watchdogs shrank from asking the CIA embarrassing questions (Sen. Russell admits he was never informed about the Bay of Pigs invasion) this arrangement was eminently satisfactory to the agency, but it is not satisfactory to a growing number of Senators.

Even the man who created the agency, President Truman, became disturbed over its freewheeling status. In Congress itself 150 resolutions have been introduced from year to year to provide formalized supervision, but the power and prestige of Russell, backed by the Inner Club, have successfully frustrated any reform.

Now the astute Russell has temporarily taken some of the steam out of the drive by inviting Fulbright and two other members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to join the watchdog group. Thus, real supervision will probably have to wait until another egregious CIA blunder rekindles public interest, but if the past is any barometer the CIA will sooner or later oblige.

Meanwhile, it is comforting to know that in Fulbright the watchdog group now includes at least one Senator who does not share the view of former Sen. Leverett Saltonstall, who has just retired from the group.

"The difficulty in asking questions and getting information," said Saltonstall, "is that we might obtain information which I personally would rather not have unless it was essential for me as a member of Congress to have it."

There are those who think the secret, furtive and Constitutionally unauthorized invasion of another country might be "essential" information. The CIA will undoubtedly find Fulbright in that category.

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